

РОССИЯ И ВОСТОК

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**Russian classical literature on Chinese stage:
Problems of adaptation and perception****Yu. S. Mylnikova*

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Most of the state-owned theatres in the PRC implement the Stanislavsky's system. The Stanislavsky's system has flourished in China since the 1950s. It comes as no surprise because at this time in the USSR Stanislavsky was praised to be "the top of socialist realism". At the beginning of the 1960s, five among eight volumes of the complete works of Stanislavsky were translated into Chinese, and in all theoretical publications in China he was called "the creator of realistic theatre". A closer view to the contemporary *huaju* ("spoken drama") reveals that the Stanislavsky's method was perceived in China only partly. This paper will try to give a brief overview of several fundamental problems of perception and interpretations that contemporary Chinese theatre confronts, focusing on the production of Russian plays. The first problem is the lack of tradition or habit to examine, to investigate the "material" (epoch described in the particular play, way of life, attitude to religion, cultural characteristics etc.). As a result, the second problem is the challenge of translation. The third problem is the dominance of "international stereotypes": the Chinese know how to play the Russians, know how to play the Americans; other nationalities more or less fit these two performing models. The fourth problem is the absence of full-blooded theatrical critique. And the fifth problem is the necessity to workout common professional criteria.

Keywords: Chinese contemporary theatre, Russian plays in China, the Stanislavsky's system, perception and interpretation.

Since the early 20th century China, Japan and India have been trying to adapt and develop the methodology of the European theatre. The artistic forms of this theatre possessed radical novelty as regards their civil and social content when compared with the

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traditional oriental formats. The entire contemporary Asian theatre resulted from reworking and interpretation of European models of drama theatre, which served also as a conduit for propagation of novel political ideas.

Zhang Pengchun (1892–1957), who studied in America (at the University of Columbia) and was a connoisseur of the European theatre, founded a new theatre company «Nankai New Drama» in Tianjin in 1914. His expertise became a model for many acting schools and especially for playwrights specializing in «spoken drama». The latter endorsed the main theses of the «May Fourth Movement» whose name was associated with the day when in 1919 a manifestation was proclaimed which sought to substitute old-fashioned Chinese feudal values with new democratic ones of which Europe was the origin. Such playwrights as Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1962), Tian Han (1898–1968), Hong Shen (1894–1955)¹ authored secular plays written in realist style. In that current of novelty, which included revisions of actors' art, Cao Yu (1910–1996), a celebrated author of «spoken drama», undauntingly staged all primary specimen of European drama: Chekhov, Ibsen, Wilde, O'Neal as well as Shakespeare and ancient Greek dramatists.

Europe being the melting pot of experiments inspired a young scholar Huang Zuolin² (1906–1994) to travel to England in the early 1930-s where he met Bernard Shaw and Michel Saint-Denis, a student of Jacques Copeau [1, p.38]. It was also in England that he encountered the «System» of Stanislavski and the theatre of Brecht. The first part of Stanislavski's «An Actor's Work» was translated from English by a Chinese director Zheng Junli in 1937 [2, 139], with the complete translation emerging in Chinese a few years later. That edition was followed by translations of other Russian directors («*My Life in the Russian Theatre*» by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, «*The Art of the Actor and the Director*» by Boris Zakhava), which greatly assisted activists of the Chinese theatre in studying concepts of Russian theatrical tradition. In 1939 the Stanislavski's system was first implemented in actors training by Huang Zuolin and his spouse, actress Dan Ni [2, p. 140]. Capillary distribution of Stanislavski's and Brecht's theories in Asia produced rather original implementations of their principles, which allowed to deepen the Asian quest for the theatre (which however never went as far as fundamental comprehension).

In the 1950s and 1970s the Russian and the Soviet literary material dominated translations of foreign literature in China. Fame enjoyed by the Russian theatrical tradition played a role of great importance in this, inasmuch as the cultural policy of China of that period was largely oriented towards studying and researching Soviet art. Suffice it to say, that both the 160th anniversary of the birth of Alexander Pushkin and the centenary anniversary of Anton Chekhov were both celebrated rather opulently in China. A majority of classical Russian drama works were also translated into Chinese. Thereat the Russian theatre as such and respectively the Soviet theatre in China were directly related largely to the name of Constantine Stanislavski. Although prior to the commencement of the Cultural Revolution several books on stage craft, drama education and theatre pedagogy had been translated into Chinese, no history of great Russian Theatre direction, which had caused an enormous influence on the entire tradition of the western theatre in the 20th century, was known in China.

¹ It was them who in 1928 came up with the term «spoken drama» — *huaju* 话剧.

² Huang Zuolin was the originator of the epic People's Theatre in Shanghai, who also became its director following his return from England.

The interest to Stanislavski's system peaked in the early 1950s, which is reasonably unsurprising, for it was particularly in that period that in the USSR Stanislavski had been elevated to the summit of the "socialist realism". Stanislavski's method had become the official orthodoxy in the Soviet Theatre. It must be noted though that the term "method" was understood as denoting only one section of his system, namely the method of physical action, which Stanislavski had been developing since 1935.

In the early 1960s five out of eight volumes of Stanislavsky's complete works were translated into Chinese. It must be borne in mind that both in the 1930s when China displayed a huge interest towards the Soviet theatre, as well as in the 1960s, all theoretical treatises on stagecraft published in what was now called the Peoples Republic of China revealed Stanislavski as the creator of realistic theatre and that designation came to be firmly implanted in the minds of Chinese directors and theatre educators.

Before we now proceed directly to describe the way in which Chinese actors and actresses realise themselves in the limelight, it would not be unreasonable to say a few words about some fundamental notions that Stanislavski's system is based on. The novelty, and, as it came to be subsequently revealed, sheer genius and imperishable legacy of that method were really due to the fact that Stanislavski was the first man to announce, and to redirect the entire cognitive field of the theatre tradition and schooling from the question "In what way to do it?" to the question "What's actually behind it?" That is to say the primary importance of the inner world of human beings came to the forefront with all its infinity and profundity. The gist of the method, its barebones if you will, consists in the necessity for the actor to completely delve into the inner world of the character he portrays. The actor must possess all knowledge about that man or woman, about their inner and outer lives, on the ground of which the character thinks which ultimately projects into his or her physical movements. True physical comportment arises through the actor's understanding of the deepest recesses of mind which the character's thought and speech inhabit. Prior to Stanislavski this had never been paid any attention to. Stanislavski had engendered the so-called at-the-table session approach, prior to which nobody had ever sat round a table detailing the play's subject matter and deliberating over its content. This sparked off the tradition of actors' research as well as the famous notion of "the part's decoys". Every actor must be knowledgeable about decoys of his or her part, that is to say what is it about the part that attracts him to it, and deploy the decoys so that acting would become stimulating. The method is the inner world of the human being, immersion into it, incredible inner life, understanding the circumstances.

Stanislavski proclaimed that the purpose of the dramatic Art is a creation of "the life of the human spirit" of that part and "a translation thereof into an artistic form" [3, p. 43]. He developed the whole series of devices and exercises which were included into his book "An Actor's Work on his Part as a Process of Creative Experiencing".

This term, "experiencing" defies translation. The English "experience" or "feeling" gives one a similar dichotomy and a similar semantic double in Chinese, which likewise it would be fitting to divide with an alternative conjunction "or". This term is translated into Chinese as a two words compound, either *ganshou* 感受 — feeling, or *tiyan* 体验 — experience.

Not a single one of the more or less widely distributed world languages possesses a single word which would be capable of embodying the meaning which Stanislavski invested in it. One is always in need of translating it with several words which, of course, is far

from being convenient. Therefore it becomes much less troublesome to adopt a familiar word, i.e. “feeling”. Although combining two words, both in English and in Chinese — “experience of feeling” is much more proximate in its meaning to the original Russian, such conjunction is cumbersome and would still be used in a common parlance with a lot of reservation, not least for the reason that in the Russian language there exists an expression which means “the experience of feeling something”.

According to Stanislavski, to understand is to deeply re-live, integrate, or feel. This “feel” however is translated by the actor of any nationality as to “be a subject of a feeling”. “That’s the way I’m feeling it today” — is a phrase which can often be heard in contemporary China, uttered both by professional actors as well as by students of acting. They generally cling to this explanation to justify their inactivity on the stage. Moreover, they all think that if they really “feel” something, that is if they cry, gasp for breath, shout, and so on, it means that they are acting well. It becomes hugely difficult to convince them of the contrary, for their interpretation of feeling corresponds to overstimulation of the nervous system up until almost an hysterical state, the process of such overstimulation being seen as equivalent to working on or developing a part. They confidently say that they know this is the Russian school — to cry with real tears is Stanislavski. This is what makes a Chinese actor proud. It is very peculiar that a true feeling is understood as being that of distress, not happiness, for one of the meanings of “to experience” is “to suffer”.

On the contrary, to “really feel” is first and foremost to recall what it would feel like if I were experiencing fear, first, or hunger; if I had been scared or frozen, or if I had lifted a heavy stone and such like. Having recalled that feeling, the next step would be trying to re-experience it, that is to rebuild a chain of physical actions and sensations. The first meaning of the word «to experience» is to live again or, literally, to re-live. Stanislavski used to say that as soon as this “magical if it had been” appears it immediately engenders an equally magical “action”. Action is a fundamental notion of his system. Action is a psycho-physical process of achieving your goal whilst being confronted with adverse circumstances imposed on you independently of your own will.

The problem is not the so-called *untranslatability*, although to translate stage directions from Russian into Chinese is more difficult than to translate a scholarly article or a scientific paper. The problem largely consists in the fact that both in Russian and in Chinese, or any other language for that matter, Stanislavski’s system requires studying through practice. It is not possible to read a book by Stanislavski (although it is necessary to read it anyway) or to attend a workshop and thus believe that you have just “bagged” the system.

As long as you have not traversed with your body, nerves and thoughts the entire path of creating a part, a staging, a full play, nothing of value will ever be produced.

So we can posit the first problem as the teaching of Stanislavski’s method. It seems that the history of teaching it in China is closely related to political history of the relationship between China and Russia in the 20th century, consisting of rises, falls, eternal friendships, breaking up for good, sometimes as far as a military exchange on Russian-Chinese border. These days it is rather difficult to establish who the first teachers of the system were, how they taught it, who interpreted it, whether they were Russian, perhaps immigrants, as the case was with the USA where the remaining staff of the Moscow Academic Theatre Company communicated it based on their personal understanding and interpretation. It is evident of course that the Chinese must have heard something about Stanislavski’s method, for they have a certain tradition of its development and interpretation. However, when

practical work on stage commences the local habits and traditions, the local mentality takes over, as it naturally happens in any other country, too. The next problem is that the Chinese drama has no tradition, or habit to research material specific to a part.

Actors of Russian psychological drama owe to Stanislavski their knowledge that prior to rehearsals it is necessary to study the time at which action occurs, research its place, prevalent habits and even, if required, the entire history of a state or country, that is to say, the actors really need to immerse themselves into the world which they will represent on stage. And even if it turns out that your performance is going to be a solitary presence on an empty stage without any stage set and wearing only a plain uniform, the approach commanded by the system will be still valid. If you are going to give something up, then you might as well know exactly what it is you intend to forgo. It's an established practice to read books, visit museums, or at the end of days at least to look it up in the Internet. Working in China with Chinese actors one finds, to one's unending curiosity, that such preparatory work is not done by anyone (well, at least not at one's own accord and not out of free will). That includes stage managers and costume designers. Of course immersing yourself into a time — specific material will not guarantee the success of the show, but lack of elementary knowledge depletes the actors' imagination, leaving them high and dry without its nourishing substratum.

The third Problem is certainly translation of the text but this problem is tightly related to the second one. A Chinese translator is unschooled in many aspects of Russian reality to be able to provide an adequate rendering of the original.

The quality of translation is usually firmly grounded in a knowledge of life and reality as described by the playwright. Here it might be fitting to adduce several examples.

1. «Grigory... — And whom should you find to keep your company?! A pantryman, a clodhopper! You are in your formative years and whom are you going out with?!». The Chinese translation runs as follows: «You have got yourself a rude man from the restaurant! Yet your personality has just been formed through education». The most interesting fact is that should one carefully study the original Russian wording, it becomes possible to identify proper and meaningful Chinese analogies.

2. Individual speech features of characters. That is to say the author uses speech, vocabulary, and individual expressions to indicate the social standing of his characters, their origins, occupation and so on. In actuality, the very subject matter of Tolstoy's *The Fruits of Enlightenment* quoted above is a conflict of various social groups particularly noticeable because it is conveyed through a comic, yea, almost farcical medium. Tolstoy describes 1) noblemen who speak in a very particular way, peppering their speech with multiple words in foreign languages, predominantly French, use a lot of scientific, or to be more exact, pseudoscientific terms; 2) city servants who parrot their masters' vocabulary often distorting it and certainly not understanding the meaning; 3) serfs from the village.

3. Servants by and large present the biggest challenge. In Tolstoy's writings one finds descriptions of inn keepers, bar keepers, pantry men, flunkies, lackeys, footmen, chasseurs, valets, chamber maids, doormen, cabbies, scullery maids, chefs and mess caterers. They all represent different posts, different stations, sometimes even different professions, implying different skills, other social standing and extremely versatile patterns of behaviour. In the Russian language a manservant and a lackey are two different professions, as are a cook and a chef. That is not to mention a lackey and a valet. These differences are not preserved and overlooked in Chinese translations, which of course is understandable and even acceptable. But what is an actor to do, when he or she needs to act properly, identify and define their characters?

4. Another philological problem would seem to be the Russian names and patronymics, which present an insurmountable challenge for the Chinese tongue. Owing to a high specificity of the Chinese language the ubiquitous Russian Fyodor Ivanoviches, Leonid Fyodoroviches, Vassily Leonidoviches and a host of others would be completely unintelligible phonetic mess behind which nothing whatsoever can be discerned. The Chinese certainly cancel all patronymics during rehearsals. But use of a patronymic in the Russian reality is not devoid of a particular semantic impact — it commands respect, it requires usage of the honorific pronoun, it might imply also irony, threat, etc., that is to say, using a patronymic is somehow related to the action that the speaker is about to perform.

5. Each country has traditions which are directly related to the cuisine, quality food and the rituals associated with that. There are certain names, colour combinations, etc., when, even without penetrating the substratum of the context, it becomes clear what the function is of this of that meal. For example, if in the morning someone is asking for brine, a pickled cucumber or some sauerkraut, the Russians immediately understand that the person is hung over. The above-mentioned things are all related to humour. Humour works better when it is implied and is later recognised. But it is also well known that every country has its own traditions of fighting hangovers. Besides, sauerkraut in the morning would not come across as anything strange to the Chinese taste and ear. The translator needs, therefore to seek meaningful analogies.

Thus, the third problem of staging Russian classics in China is translation accuracy and adequacy.

The fourth problem is that of the international clichés. It turned out that in China in principle actors knew how to play either the Russians or the Americans, distributing the rest of the world's peoples between those two. The Russians are of course long-suffering and profoundly thoughtful. The stage action is therefore pretentious and dull with very little or no rhythm.

Chinese actors are unbelievably individualistic on stage, one might say even egotistical. Each acts his or her own part and they are very often unable to strike a common chord with each other. A Chinese actor may be quite deeply immersed into himself but he is never quite immersed into the reality of his partner. In order to see that, one needs no knowledge of the Chinese language. Each actor cracks his own jokes, and exists in his own world without feeling his comrades' encouragement, support or sense of unity. This was indeed an eye-opening discovery, because the Russian stereotype of the Chinese is that the entire nation forms one huge family, that it possesses, as it were, one hand with one million fingers, that it represents collective mind, mutual trust and support, as the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky put it. However, no such mutuality or collectivism will be found in the Chinese drama theatre.

The Russian School of drama acting at the very least tries to achieve a sense of mutuality on the stage (which distinguishes it from other acting schools and traditions and which feature was adopted by the Americans and the English who, in the current world, are the best proponents of this acting method. In any theatre production, in any film, however powerful individual actors may be, the sheer miracle of transformation can happen only in one case — that is when we witness a stage ensemble. In that respect the Chinese are complete individualists. Even the way of their rehearsals, of memorising lines and practising paired scenes, when they are perched far away from each other in the corners of the rehearsal hall — that observation too reinforces the above argument.

Having laid his hands on the text of the play a contemporary Chinese actor, upon having learnt that he is going to play a part of a father, for instance, immediately knows

how he will play it — he will adopt a gate of an elderly gentleman, speak in a funny way, jerk his head, and so on. It may be the case that being 40 years old and having a grown-up son this person still plays an imaginary father in spite of the fact that he himself is a father of a real fully grown child. In other words, there is always a gap between an actor and his image, which is precisely the feature which the Russian, European, and North American acting schools try to avoid by removing the gap between self and the character, between the actor and the person whom he seeks to portray. All clichéd and hackneyed, but nonetheless amazing standards of the Stanislavski system originate from there. For example, “when you play an evil man try to find where he may be kind, be an advocate of the part you play, that is try to find justification for what your character does.” If you are playing Hitler teach yourself to be in Hitler’s skin — in spite of playing a monster seek to understand what made that person tick. It is precisely this feature which is often lacking in Chinese reality, mostly for the reason that their stagecraft and theatre pedagogy have been deficient.

An impression is thus formed that in the Chinese drama theatre there is a lack of understanding that without a profound inner study of a play, without a detailed insight into the inner life of each *dramatis persona* the magical fully fledged effect of touching thespian hearts is unobtainable. For a Chinese actor the world is that of superficiality. I am a daughter, I am a father, I am a lover, I am a corrupt official.... Those are just masks stuck to the actors’ faces. Although there is temperament, and there is passion (like also in the Chinese national character), this temperament is highly explosive and extremely superficial. Hence the main problem of the Chinese theatre: for an actor in China it is always the question of “In what way to do it?” rather than the question of “What is actually behind it?”: how shall I walk, which intonation should I employ? A Chinese actor will normally not ask himself questions like: «What happened to me before?», «Why am I speaking to her in this way?», «Which circumstances have provoked this reaction in me?» and so on.

In pedagogy, including the theatre pedagogy, Russia and China have different traditions, different criteria and different education strategies.

Stanislavski built his system not just with the intention of making it easier for the actor to achieve success in his craft. His entire life had been dedicated to seeking and identifying the ethical justification of the actor’s profession. For it is shameful to simply display one’s inner and outer mimetic skills. It is shameful not to expend the inner resources, nor to explore the inner recesses of one’s soul, instead simply churning out the same mechanical sequence time and time again. To learn your craft in other professions is always good. But in the theatre a crafty actor is almost a curse and an obscenity.

In everything which concerns the theatre, theatrical action, and, most importantly, the actors themselves, today we navigate by two major evaluation parameters, viz. “alive” and “unalive”. Regarding the actors art, and primarily that of a drama act, the spectator in essence may have only two judgements (whichever vocabulary he may employ to express them): viz. “I believe” or “I don’t believe”. I believe that the actor is living through, and emotionally identifying with the feelings of his character at this particular moment and thus is taking me along so that I am also able to live through it. Or I do not believe, that is to say, I remain an outsider, wholly unconcerned with the situation, albeit possibly benevolent. The spectator has over the years trained himself to become such a benevolent observer. For it was in a not so distant past that theatre goers might pelt “poor players” with all manner of putrid rubbish and verbal abuse, should they fail to deliver true act-

ing. Many viewers were literally tormented sitting in the house plodding through a dull, unintelligible, vulgar, unattractive and uninteresting play. The director or the acting coach is tormented 100 times more intensively. What you dedicate your time, your strength your health, your moments of inspiration to suddenly from being alive turns into something dead, that is to say ugly. The emotional charge, the nerves, the strain of a creative process is directly related with ethical justification. Philosophically speaking actors enliven dead matter of a text, donating their bodies and minds to give birth to some new, previously non-existent entity. When that fails to happen, however, when actors enunciate a text which is alien to them with intonations cloned from one part to another, or, even worse, try to flirt with the public, in fact being concerned entirely with themselves and their personal grandeur, it becomes impossible for a theatre professional to see this without suffering, anger, and revulsion. It is impossible to avoid conflicts between the director and the acting troupe. This conflict should not be avoided. It is important however to select general criteria, to have time to explain why one thing is good and the other is bad. Even Georgy Tovstonogov, a great Russian theatre director, pointed that out, saying: "In order to speak professionally there should be a common criterion" [4, p. 77].

The actors art in the Russian tradition is more a vocation, a service rather than a job. A service implies hard graft, discipline, and conformance with certain ethical norms. In China actors would be primarily filmed in TV commercials or endless TV series which is normally understood as a peak, the summit of one's career. Being invited to act in cinema is nearly fictional, because it is entirely a matter of luck. In a drama theatre however first and foremost, and just like in the rest of the world, there are very few seats, and correspondingly rather low salaries, which means this activity is reserved by and large for the most enthusiastic. These considerations create a psychology not of a creator but of a performer, albeit a diligent and conscientious one. No one is going to sacrifice their lives to the shrine of art, this issue is irrelevant. And there is nothing bad whatsoever about it. But the entire corpus of classical Russian literature is oriented towards this service and dedication, for it has an enormous ethical charge. Russian writers were seeking this moral core in people and it was either presence or absence of that core that conditioned their choice of characters, contents, collisions, and convolutions of the plot. To quote Stanislavski yet again, moral issues and primarily their resolutions became the global task of writers and dramatists. The writer — a prophet, the writer — a teacher, the writer — a savant, the writer — a paragon of morality.

Rehearsals of the Russian classics in China present a conflict area by and in themselves, both in approach to rehearsals and their result — the actual performance. For it is impossible to do justice to the works of Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin and Ostrovsky by simply acting them well.

Should one even to the tiniest degree immerse oneself into the complexity and profundity of the tasks posited in a work of literature, one stands a good chance of not failing. Should one fail however, one will not be saved by appropriate choice of costumes and set design. Parameters of personality of even the most revolting or bleak character in the great Russian literature is so much bigger then the psychological framework of even the most diligent actor, that rehearsals begin to resemble rollercoaster rides, where the director is either spun upwards towards exaltation and hope, or hurled downwards into the abyss of utmost despair. Thus the last but not least, and possibly even the most important, is the problem of working out common professional criteria.

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Проблемы постановки русской классики на китайской сцене

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С начала XX в. Китай, Япония и Индия пытаются адаптировать и разработать методы европейского театра. Совершенно новые по сравнению с традиционной классикой Востока формы этого театра были революционными по своему гражданскому и социальному содержанию. Весь современный театр в Азии стал результатом освоения канонов европейского драматического театра, бывшего к тому же проводником новых политических идей. История современного драматического театра в Китае возникла в первом десятилетии XX в., когда китайские студенты театральной труппы «Общество весенней ивы» начали ставить произведения европейской и русской драматургии. Обращение к западному театральному искусству как к источнику вдохновения неслучайно — само рождение и развитие нового театра разговорной драмы хуацзюй было инициировано столкновением Китая с западной цивилизацией. Начинается кардинальная трансформация китайского театра, основанная на адаптации сценических приемов западного театра и на материале западной (и русской в особенности) классической и современной литературы. Опыт практической работы с профессиональными театральными коллективами в Китае (Пекинский народный художественный театр, Центр драматического искусства г. Гуанчжоу, Нанкинский городской драматический театр), участие в совместных российско-китайских постановках позволили провести данное исследование и понять, как работают местные театральные деятели, в буквальном смысле — как они работают над словом и, пользуясь терминологией Станислав-

ского, над ролью. Потому что сколько ни читай исследований, сколько ни смотри приезжих гастролеров или китайское кино, все равно не поймешь, что представляет собой китайская театральная действительность, пока на практике не столкнешься с ней. Данная статья посвящена рассмотрению способа существования на театральных подмостках китайских актеров, проблемы преподавания системы Станиславского в Китае, трудностям перевода, а также необходимости выработки общих профессиональных критериев.

Ключевые слова: драматический театр Китая, русская классика в китайском переводе, система Станиславского, история театра в Китае.

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